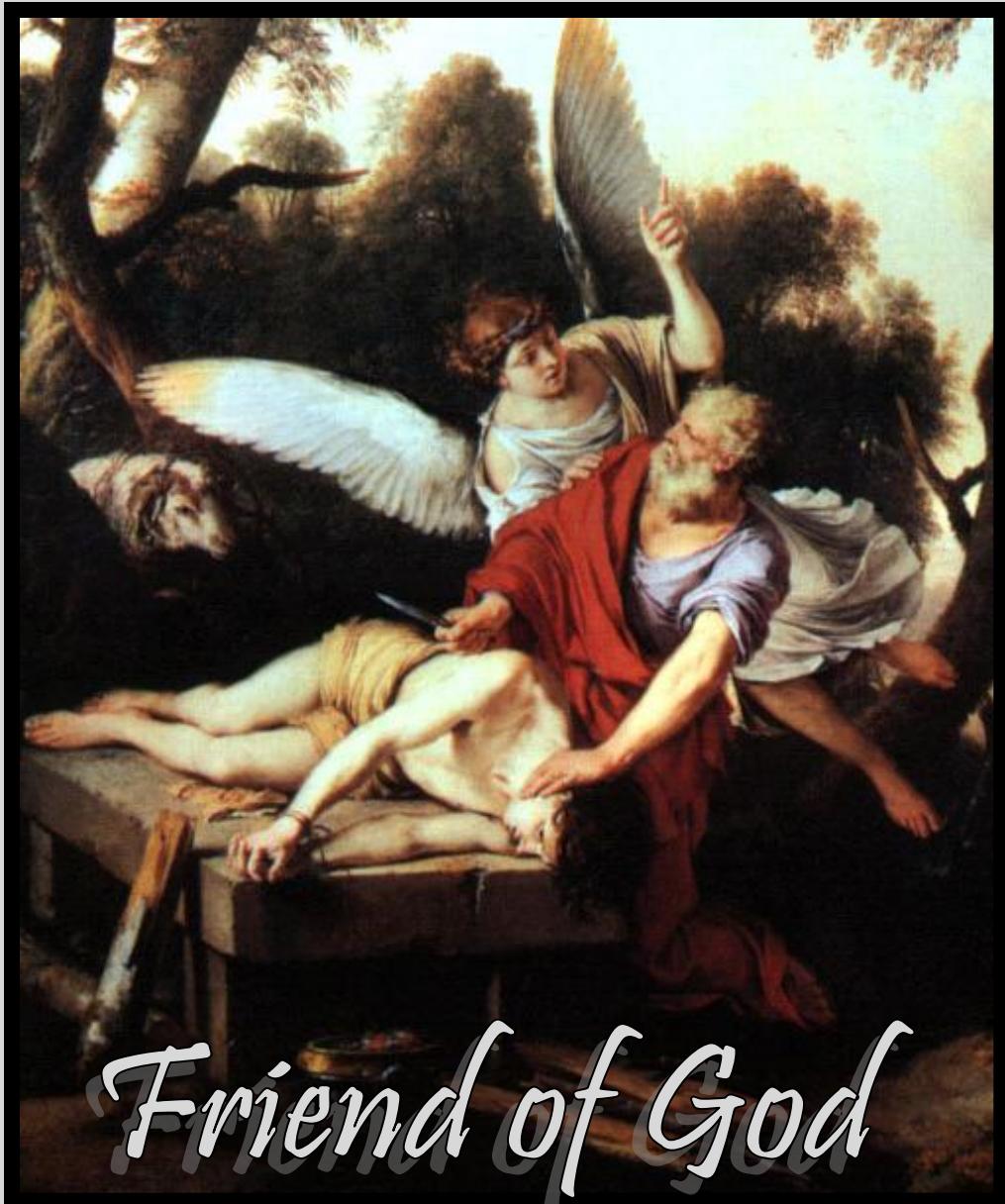


Abraham



Friend of God

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Father Felix, O.M.Cap.

COVER ART: *Abraham Sacrificing Isaac*, oil on canvas. Painted around 1650 by Laurent de La Hyre (1606 – 1656). This painting can be seen at the Rheims Museum of Fine Arts in Rheims, France.



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INTRODUCTION

After recounting the death of Noe, the biblical narrative resumes with the well-known ethnographical table of Genesis 10, which is a survey of the nations of antiquity descended from the sons of Noe.

Beginning from Japheth this table describes his descendants as occupying “the islands of the Gentiles” (10, 5), an expression which throughout the Old Testament means the islands and coasts of the Mediterranean Ocean. Among them are mentioned Gomer—eponymous ancestor of the Cimmerians from whom branched the Celts and Indo-Germanic peoples of later times; Magog, Madai, Javan, and Thiras—founders of the Scythians, Medes, Greeks, and Thracians respectively; and Tharsis—descendant of Javan—who gave his name to the country of Tharsis (or Tarshish), as Baetica in southern Spain was known in ancient times.

The Chamites

Next we have the descendants of Cham; and prominence is given to Chanaan who had been cursed by Noe (9, 25), and to the inhabitants of the country called from him Chanaan, which country when Moses wrote was now the Promised Land. (11, 15-19). From Chanaan descended the Phoenicians and the Hethites (or Hittites). Another important name here is Mesram (Misraim in the original), the Hebrew name for Egypt. Of Nemrod (or Nimrod) we have relatively lengthy notice (10, 8-12). He was “a stout hunter before the Lord;” i.e., an exceedingly powerful conqueror, so much so that his achievements became a standard of comparison. “Hence came a proverb: Even as Nemrod the stout hunter before the Lord.” (10, 9). He united under his sole rule Babylon (Babel), Arach (Erech), Achad (Akkad) and Chalanne (Kalneh)—cities “in the land of Sennaar,” i.e. Sumer or Babylonia. The passage is, “Out of that land came forth Assur,

and built Ninive and the streets of the city and Chale. Resen also between Ninive and Chale: this is the great city is better understood of Nemrod. It can mean in the original: Out of that land (Babylonia) he came forth to Assur and built Ninive . . . etc.; and this latter meaning fits the context better. Thus, Nemrod would have extended his work of organization northward and founded the Assyrian empire in turn. A further indication of the Babylonian origin of Assyrian civilization comes from archaeology. It has been discovered that the Assyrians built their houses of brick and on large artificial mounds as did the Babylonians. Now this was not necessary in Assyria where stone was plentiful to hand, and where danger of inundation by the Tigris did not exist. The explanation, therefore, is thought to be the retention of Babylonian ideas of architecture "with that conservatism so often displayed by primitive peoples." Again, objects of the type of the early Sumerian period of Babylon have been excavated at Kalat Sharkat, which is believed to be the site of Assur.

The Semites

Lastly, we have the descendants of Sem. He was the eldest of Noe's sons, as Moses takes pains to remind us (10, 21); but the Semites are kept for last because the others are recounted only to be dismissed, and the scope of the narrative is restricted to include only the Hebrew people. Heber is here placed third in descent from Sem. In the Gospel, however (St. Luke 3, 35-36), which follows the Greek (Septuagint) version he is fourth—Cainan being added between Arphaxad and Sale. The Septuagint has the authority of the Gospel on the point, and so cannot be called in doubt. This shows that the biblical genealogies are not necessarily from father to son. From Heber in turn was descended Phaleg, so named "because in his days the earth was divided" (10, 25),—a reference, presumably, to the dispersion after the confusion of Babel as described in the ensuing chapter. Among "the sons of Sem" are mentioned Elam, who gave his name to the Elamites, the age-long enemies of the Babylonians, and Assur from whom probably the city of Assur (Ashur) and the land of Assyria were named.

The Tower of Babel

A prominent feature of the city-states of ancient Babylonia, was the ziggurat or temple-tower, but one of these has an extraordinary history, and its erection provoked divine intervention: "And they said: "Come let us make a city and tower, the top whereof may reach to heaven, and let us make our name famous before (i.e., LEST) we be scattered abroad into all lands." (11, 4). Their idea was not of climbing to heaven, but of thwarting that dispersion of the race which was decreed and formally commanded by God (in 9, 1). In the language of anthropomorphism, God is described as preparing to frustrate their

design. He “confounded their tongue,” i.e., confused their language so that they were compelled to disperse “from that place into all lands.” (11, 8). What the nature of that confusion was we are not told. It is simply stated that their common language was suddenly and (from the context) miraculously confused, so that they could “not understand one another’s speech.” (41, 7).

“Abraham, Friend of God”

Now we have repeated, but this time summarily, the genealogy of Sem. (11, 10-27). Eight descendants are given in direct line, and the purpose clearly is to lead the narrative on to the ninth; viz. Abraham, the Father of the Hebrew race, the greatest name and the grandest figure in Old Testament history. He holds the narrative from this point (11, 28) until 25, 10, and the history of Abraham and his heirs become the history of Revelation.

CHAPTER I

Abraham — The Great Patriarch

Abram, as he is called until 17, 5, was the son of Thare, a lineal descendant of Sem. Two brothers of Abram are mentioned—Nachor and Aran; and Aran had a son named Lot.

“And Aran died before Thare his father, in the land of his nativity in Ur of the Chaldees.” (11, 28). The Hebrew expression here translated ‘before’ means ‘before the face of;’ i.e., in the presence of’ and so adds to the idea of priority a poignant touch of tragedy. Thare with Abram, Sarai (Abram’s wife), and Lot whom Thare seems to have adopted on Aran’s death removed from Chaldea “to go into the land of Chanaan, and they came as far as Haran and dwelt there.” (11, 31). Haran (or Charan) is thought to be in the northwest of Mesopotamia about six hundred miles from Ur. Why the journey was interrupted, we are not told. Thare died in Caran at the age of two hundred and five years. It is worthy to note that the age of the Patriarchs has lessened steadily since Shem who lived six hundred years. (11, 10-11).

UR of the Chaldees

The site of Ur in southern Babylonia or Chaldea has been identified as modern Mugheir, and thoroughly explored in recent times. Few places have yielded better archaeological results. It was a famous city-state widely known among the Babylonians themselves, and the seat of the worship of Nannar—the moon-god. Three dynasties of kings had ruled in Ur between the Deluge and the third millennium B.C. It had reached a high peak of

civilization in Abraham's time; it was a commercial and business centre; there was a developed architecture; it housed refinement, wealth, and luxury. All this sheds no little light on 'the vocation of Abraham.' and the divine purpose in bidding him: Go forth out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and out of thy father's house, and come into the land which I shall show thee." (12, 1). Abraham left Haran when he was seventy-five years old, taking with him Sarai and Lot, his and their slaves and property, and went to Chanaan.

Chanaan is the old name of Palestine (the Holy Land). The name Palestine from Philistines, and was popularized by Herodotus and Josephus, the Greek and Jewish historians. Abraham, therefore, left civilization to go a stranger into an undeveloped country, a well-appointed permanent home to become a nomad living in tents and subsisting precariously. Also while duly appreciating the help which science affords us we must not overlook the doctrinal and historical commentary which St. Paul provides: "By faith he that is called Abraham obeyed to go out into a place which he was to receive for an inheritance, and he went out not knowing whither he went. By faith he abode in the land dwelling in cottages (i.e., 'tents') . . ." (Hebrews 11, 8-9). In giving the command, God promised Abram liberal, temporal, and spiritual reward saying, "I will make of thee a great, nation, and I will bless thee and magnify thy name

IN THEE shall all the kindred (i.e., 'nations') of the earth be blessed (12, 2-3). Here is renewed and clarified the Messianic prophecy already twice recorded—after the Fall (3, 15), and to Sem (9, 27).

Chanaan and Egypt

Abram must have entered Chanaan at the northeast coming by way of Damascus. He then travelled southward by easy stages in nomad fashion to Sichem (modern Nablus), "as far as the noble vale" (12, 6)—an expression which should have been translated 'the oak grove of Moreh.' Here God appeared in visible form to Abram and renewed the promise of the country to his posterity. From Sichem he went to Bethel, and thence to Negeb in the south. Now a famine in the country forced him to go to Egypt, and here a singular incident occurred. Before they left, Mesopotamia Abram had made an agreement with Sarai that she should pass as his sister—a word used in Hebrew in a wide sense for a near relation. This was the truth indeed—Sarai was in fact his niece (20', 12)—but not the whole truth. It was a time when polygamy was universally practiced, and in Egypt, especially the moral standard was very low. Abram's purpose in making this mental reservation was to protect himself lest he might be murdered by someone eager to have Sarai in marriage. Sarai was a very beautiful woman, and the king of Egypt had her

seized and taken to be his wife. “But the Lord scoured Pharao and his house with most grievous stripes . . .” (12, 17). Pharao then discovered the whole truth and promptly restored Sarai to her husband. In spite of the failure of the device on this occasion we find Abram employing it again at a later date against Abimelech, King of Gerara (20, 1-18), and with a precisely similar result.

The question now naturally suggests itself: did Abram act wrongly in this? Here the exegete has perforce to turn moralist, for the Scripture itself gives no reply. Father Hetzenauer quotes with approval Cornelius a Lapide who follows Saint Augustine in excusing Abram from sin, because a) Sarai was his ‘sister’ in the accepted sense, as Lot is called his ‘brother’ in 14, 16 and elsewhere; b) he did not deny that she was his wife, he merely kept silence on the point; and c) he had reasonable cause for this reticence, since his very life was threatened.

Separation from Lot

Abram, Sarai, and Lot with their retinue of slaves and their flocks and herds returned to Negeb. The journey to Egypt had increased their wealth, and the Patriarch is described at this point as being “very rich in possession of gold and silver” (13, 2). They returned by the same route by which they had come until they reached their starting point, Bethel, again. The united flocks were now so numerous that contention arose between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. Abram foresaw that he and his nephew would inevitably be drawn into these disputes; so he proposed that Lot and he should separate. In a very generous spirit, he allowed to his nephew the choice of position: “Behold the whole land is before thee: depart from me I pray thee: if thou wilt go to the left hand I will take the right: if thou choose the right hand I will pass to the left.” (13, 9).

Lot took full advantage of the faculty granted him. He viewed the country carefully, and the fertile district of the Jordan valley decided his choice. This was before the destruction of the Pentapolis, and that region was then “as the Paradise of the Lord.” (13, 10). Lot, therefore, made Sodom his headquarters and pastured his flocks in the ‘Round of the Jordan.’ In the event his choice was an unhappy one. The inhabitants of these cities “were very wicked and sinners before the face of the Lord beyond Measure.” (13, 13). Lot soon had reason to regret the kind of’ his surroundings; in 2 Peter 2, 8, he is described as “dwelling among them, who from day to day vexed the just soul with unjust works.”

Thereafter Abram lived in the neighborhood of Hebron, and he built “an altar to the Lord” in the oak grove of Mambre. At this time also he received another revelation —a renewal of the promise of the possession of Chanaan by his numerous descendants. (13, 14-18).

Invasion of the Pentapolis

An event that occurred after the departure of Lot shows Abram in a new role which he filled with courage and prudence. The kings of the Pentapolis had been under the necessity of paying an annual tribute to Chodorlahomor, King of Elam. For twelve years, they endured this; then they revolted, and in the thirteenth year, no tribute was paid. Promptly in the fourteenth year came the King of Elam to put down the revolt. He was supported by three allies, viz., Amraphel—King of Sennaar, Arioch—King of Pontus (i.e., Lana), and Thadal—King of the Guti or Kuti. (For Guti our version reads ‘of nations’). These kings with their united forces took their route from the direction of Damascus and went due south on the east of the river Jordan and the Dead Sea. They conquered the various peoples encountered on their march—the Raphaim, the Zuzim, the Emim. Pushing their conquest south to the edge of the desert of Pharan they turned eastward to Cades, thence northward, taking their course now on the western side of the Dead Sea and adding to their territory “all the country of the Amalecites, and the Amorrhæan that dwelt in Asasonthamar” (modern Engaddi). (14, 7). The rebel kings of the five cities now advanced their united forces to meet the victors in the valley of Siddim (in our version ‘the woodland vale’). In this valley were “many pit’s of slime” (14, 10), i.e. ‘wells of bitumen,’ the presence of which proved disastrous to the weaker side in the conflict, to wit, the Pentapolis kings and their forces. These were utterly routed and the remnant who escaped slaughter fled eastward to the mountains of Moab. ‘To the victors the spoils’; and the eastern kings proceeded at once to plunder the defeated cities. They carried off all the booty they could bring; and, as was the manner of those times, they led away the inhabitants to be sold into slavery. Among the captives thus taken were Lot (Abram’s nephew) and his household.

The Reprisal

The account of the whole disaster was brought to Abram at Hebron by a fugitive. Abram had by this time made a league with Mambre and Mambre’s two brothers. Escol and Aner. At once he selected three ‘hundred and eighteen of the bravest of his slaves, and to ensure their fidelity these were moreover “of the servants born in his house.” (14, 14). With these, and supported by his new allies, he set out in pursuit of the eastern kings and unperceived came up with them at Dan (Laish) near the source of the, Jordan, where they had halted—doubtless to rest and feast. Astutely Abram divided his forces and attacked the foe simultaneously from several points and under cover of the night. His plans carried perfectly; Chodorlahomor and his allies were taken completely by surprise and entirely routed, Abram pursued them, to Hoba north of Damascus, and thence returned home with the rescued captives and the recovered spoil. (14, 15-16).

Melchisedech

The news of Abram's victory must have preceded him because the defeated king of Sodom came to Salem (later Jerusalem) to meet him on the return journey. He was accompanied by the King of Salem, Melchisedech, an extraordinary figure who enters abruptly here, and as abruptly disappears again from the stage of Hebrew history. He is described as "the priest of the most high God" (14, 18), i.e., of the One True God. He brought "bread and wine" and since this is mentioned in close connection with his priesthood the bread and wine were obviously for the purpose of sacrifice. He blessed Abram and returned thanks to God for the victory he had obtained; and Abram in turn "gave him tithes of all," (14, 20). i.e., a tenth of the spoil for divine worship.

This mysterious priest-king, Melchisedech, was a type of Christ Our Lord, Whom Psalm 109 (verses 4 and 5) calls "a priest forever according to the order of (i.e., after the manner of) Melchisedech." The bread and wine that he sacrificed are symbolic of the sacrifice of the New Covenant. "The Messianic King . . . will not be an Aaronite priest offering bloody sacrifices, but, like Melchisedech, associated, with unbloody offerings."

The points of resemblance between type and anti-type are developed in the Epistle to the Hebrews (Chapter 7). Melchisedech was King of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem in Scripture is frequently a type of the Church of Christ. The name Melchisedech means 'king of justice'; Salem means 'peace'; the Messias is likewise King of justice and peace. No mention is made in Scripture of the parentage or genealogy or birth or death of Melchisedech; this symbolizes the eternal character of Christ's Priesthood and Kingship. Abram (and through Abram his descendant Levi) paid tithes to Melchisedech as to a superior; hence the Priesthood of Christ which is after the manner of that of Melchisedech would be greater than that of Aaron.

The King of Sodom now came forward and offered Abram all the booty requesting only the return of the captives. Abram nobly refused to enrich himself in the least way from the expedition; but he stipulated that his allies should receive their share of the spoils. (14, 21-24).

CHAPTER 2

Abraham, "Father of Many Nations"

The mention above of Amraphel, ally of Chedorlahomor, reminds us that now it is opportune to attempt to give these events their place in universal history. Some authors have identified this Amraphel with the famous Hammurabi (spelled also Hamnizirapi and Khammurabi) of the Babylonian monuments, and then sought to establish a chronology from Babylonian history. The identification of the names, however, is not universally

accepted and the confidence with which authors spoke of the date of Hammurabi's reign in Babylon has been shaken in recent years. Hence, the results sometimes claimed for this method are gravely exaggerated. The same is true of that other method of correlating data from Egyptian chronology with events recorded in the Book of Exodus. Something approaching probability, however, may be found by working backwards from the date of the foundation of the Temple of Jerusalem in the fourth year of King Solomon's reign. Authors fairly agree on placing this in 969 B.C. From 3 Kings 6, 1, we know that this was 480 years after the Exodus. Adding 430 years (Exodus 12, 40) for the sojourn of the Hebrews in Egypt; 130 years since the birth of Jacob (47, 28); 60 years since the birth of Isaac (25, 26); 100 years—the age of Abraham when Isaac was born (21, 5); we have 2169-1994 B.C. as the dates of the life of Abraham. These are the first dates in the Bible that can be determined even approximately.

Independently of the identification of Amraphel with Hammurabi, however, science corroborates the truth of the Elamite invasion of Palestine above. About 2330 B.C. the Sumerian empire was conquered by the Elamites and Amorites in combination, "and the control of Mesopotamia passed into the hands of the Semitic dynasties of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon."

The Divine Contract

Another revelation, this time "by a vision," was given to Abram confirming the promise of Chanaan and containing in addition definite promise of posterity: "Fear not, Abram, I am thy protector (literally—`shield'), and thy reward (shall be) exceeding great." (15, 1). Pathetically, Abram remonstrated that he had no heir and that his possessions would soon pass to a stranger, "the son of the steward (literally—`the son of the possession'; i.e., 'the heir') of my household is this Damascus Eliezer." (15, 2). Eliezer, a native of Damascus, was the chief of Abram's slaves and, in the ordinary course of events, would be his heir if he died childless. God assured him at once and with emphasis that this would not be so; a son would be born to Abram and Sara and his descendants would be innumerable. Then Abram elicited that great act of faith, which shows the profoundly religious character of him who became "heir of the world" (Romans 4, 13) because of his faith: "Abram believed God and it was reputed to him unto justice." (15: 6). Abram requested a visible sign of this, and his request was granted. He was directed to kill three animals and two birds. The animals were then divided each into two parts and these parts placed one opposite the other with a space between. The birds were not divided, but probably were placed one opposite the other. Abram guarded the carcasses from birds of prey all day until sunset, when "a deep sleep-fell upon Abram and a great and darksome horror seized him." (15, 12). Then again 'in a vision it was revealed to him that his descendants would be strangers in Egypt and that after a long period of suffering there (symbolized by the

darksome horror above) they would return and take possession of Chanaan. “And there arose a dark mist, and there appeared a smoking furnace (i.e., ‘a thick smoke’) and a lamp of fire passing between those divisions.” (15, 17). The smoke and fire were symbolic of the presence of God; their passing between the divided victims was the solemn sanction of the contract with the ritual employed by men making covenants in those days.

Agar and Ismael

The fulfillment of the promise of a son was delayed; and in her chagrin Sarai made the strange proposal to Abram that he should take Agar, an Egyptian slave of Sarai, as a wife of inferior degree. The patriarch did so. Of course, this was contrary to the unity of matrimony—a contract between one man and one woman, terminated only by the death of one or the other—as decreed at the creation and restored by the Christian law. (St. Matthew 19, 4-6). This raises the question of the polygamy of the patriarchs. All we know with certainty is that Abraham was a just man, and “the friend of God” (St. James 2, 23) in spite of this fact. The same is true of Jacob, as we see later. Consequently, it is clear that they could not have acted contrary to the unity of matrimony unless a special exemption was given to them by God. How the exemption from this law was given—by formal divine intervention or by divine toleration of contrary custom followed in good faith—is simply not stated. A glimmer of light on the circumstance of the choice of Agar comes from Babylonian archaeology.

The laws of Hammurabi legislate for just such a case. They state that, if a wife gives her maid to her husband and the maid bear children she can no longer be sold for money but must be retained in the household. That such children would be adopted by a childless wife and regarded as hers we know from the case of Rachel later. (30, 3).

Domestic Discord

However, the harmony of the patriarchal home was now disturbed. Agar, finding herself with child, despised her mistress, Sarai, who complained to Abram. The latter reminded her that Agar was her slave and refused to interfere in the women’s quarrel. Now “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned”—Sarai retaliated, and so harshly, that Agar fled the scene and set out to return to her native Egypt. On the way as she waited to rest at a well in an oasis in the wilderness, an angel appeared to her and commanded her to “Return to thy mistress and humble thyself under her hand.” (16, 9). The angel then promised Agar that she would give birth to a son; that he would be called Ismael (‘God heareth’ in Hebrew); so named because “the Lord had heard Agar’s affliction,” that he would be “a wild man” (16, 12); (i.e., living in the desert, leading a nomad life, scorning cities and the

haunts of men) that his hand “would be against all men and all men’s hands against him” (16, 12) and finally that he would dwell to the east of Chanaan. Agar then returned to her mistress and Ismael was born when Abram was eighty-six years old.

The Covenant of Circumcision

Thirteen years after the above events, Abram received another revelation. The promise of numerous posterity was renewed; and in token of this God commanded that he be no longer called Abram (the great father’ in Hebrew) as heretofore, but Abraham (‘the father of many nations’). Next God made with Abraham the covenant of circumcision—the completion and renewal of the covenant already existing. On His side God promised Abraham descendants, the possession of Chanaan, and the spiritual favors, which these things typified, as well as His special Providence protecting and guiding Abraham and his people, “I will be their God.” (17, 8). On the other side, Abraham undertook for himself and his successors to worship God, to accept and preserve His revelation, and to obey His laws. To show acceptance of this contract, Abraham and all his male descendants and even the males among Abraham’s slaves were to be circumcised. In the future the eighth day after birth was prescribed for this—a circumstance alluded to by St. Paul in Philippians 3, 5.

Circumcision

Circumcision is known nowadays in these countries as a surgical operation undergone for reasons of physical health. Many authorities of ancient history claim that it was in vogue in Egypt long before the time of Abraham. In tropical countries, it is often necessary for hygienic reasons as a preventive of anthrax. However, many maintain that in ancient Egypt it had a religious significance primarily. Whatever is the truth of this, among the Hebrews at least, circumcision had to do with religion from the beginning and its appointment as a religious ritual was revealed to Abraham. Similarly, baptism existed already as a religious rite before it was taken over by Our Lord and made a Sacrament of the New Law.

The legal effect of circumcision under the Old Law was the admission of the individual to the covenant established between God and Abraham, and thus the restoration as far as was possible before the Redemption of the order and harmony which had been disturbed by the Fall. The prophet Osee (6, 7) speaks of Adam as having “transgressed the covenant.” By means of this rite, then, the individual was co-opted into the family of Abraham (17, 10-12); failure to submit to circumcision excluded from the privileges of the covenant even those who were by birth descended from the patriarch. Again, the circumcised person took upon himself the obligation of observing “the whole (Old

Testament) law.” (Galatians 5, 3). Circumcision must be reckoned among the “weak and needy elements” (Galatians 4, 9) of the Old Testament worship. However, did it, or did it not remit original sin? That is the point of real interest. St. Thomas Aquinas replies in the affirmative and this seems reasonable for a covenant implies friendship and sin excludes grace, which is requisite for the friendship of God. However, St. Thomas explains, circumcision remitted original sin otherwise than does the Christian Sacrament of Baptism. “In Baptism, grace is conferred by virtue of the Baptism itself which it has in so far as it is an instrument of the Passion of Christ, which latter is now an accomplished fact. In circumcision grace was conferred not by virtue of circumcision but by virtue of faith in the Passion of Christ, of which (faith) circumcision is a sign.”

Isaac, the Child of Promise

In this revelation, God further promised that Sarai, though now ninety years old, should give birth to a son after a year. From this son—to be named Isaac—nations and kings would descend. Hence, her name by divine command was changed from Sarai to be in future Sara (‘princess’). With true paternal instinct Abraham remembered Ismael and prayed for him saying, “O that Ismael may live before thee:” (17, 18). For Abraham’s prayer, God promised to bless Ismael and He assured Abraham that Ismael would be the founder of a great people. As soon as this revelation was ended, Abraham and Ismael and all the males of Abraham’s household were circumcised. (17, 15-27).

“ . . . Some, Unaware, have Entertained Angels”

A delightful and detailed description is given in Genesis 18, 1-16 of the manner in which Abraham gave hospitality to three strangers who at this time appeared one day at noon before him as he sat outside his tent in the oak grove of Mambre.

Abraham, looking up from where he was seated, saw the three strangers “standing before his tent”—the eastern convention for requesting hospitality. At once he rose, ran to meet them, and prostrated himself before them. He entreated them not to pass by his dwelling without resting and refreshing themselves. He offered to fetch them water and wash their feet (always the first courtesy to a traveler on foot in the East where sand and dust irritate and tire the sandaled feet) and to provide them with food. They signified acceptance of his offer. Abraham hurried to bid his wife provide bread. Then he selected a young calf from his herd, sent a slave to kill and prepare it for eating, and procured butter and milk. Soon a generous meal was set before the travelers, whom their host seated beneath a tree in the open within easy distance of his tent.

When they had finished their meal in the presence of Abraham who stood in personal attendance on them, the leader of the three guests spoke to him and revealed himself to be no other than God in human form. His companions were two angels. Again was made the promise of a son to Sara, this time in the hearing of Sara herself who at first was incredulous of the truth of the announcement until she realized the divine authority behind it.

The Prayer of Faith

The celestial guests now prepared to take their leave, and, as oriental courtesy demanded, their host accompanied them over a portion of their journey to show his unwillingness to lose their company. They took the direction of Sodom, the chief city of the Pentapolis, and, on the way, God revealed to Abraham that these cities were about to be destroyed because the wickedness of the inhabitants had challenged His divine justice. Then Abraham made bold to intercede for the doomed cities. He implored God “not to slay the just with the wicked.” What if there were fifty just men there, would He not spare the cities out of consideration for these? God heard this prayer. Then Abraham went further still in his advocacy of the wicked cities: “Seeing I have once begun I will speak to my Lord, whereas I am dust and ashes.” (18, 27). He then pleaded—bargained as it were—on the supposition of forty-five just men being found there; then thirty; then twenty; and finally ten. Each time God granted his prayer; if ten just men were found in the compass of the Pentapolis the divine decree will be revoked.

In the sequel (as we shall see directly) the stipulation made by Abraham was not fulfilled. The divine chastisement came; but if there had been even ten just men in those wretched cities then their destruction would have been averted by reason of the humble and confident prayer of “faithful Abraham.”

CHAPTER 3.

El Khalil – “The Friend of God”

“And the two angels came to Sodom in the evening . . .” (19, 1). Abraham had entertained three guests, so from this text St. Ambrose very reasonably concludes that the third guest of Abraham was God in human form. The description of the hospitality proffered by Abraham is here repeated substantially, but with some little differences of circumstance. The travelers encountered Lot as he “was sitting in the gate of the city” (19, 1); he went forward to meet them using the same ceremonial as Abraham had used,

but since it was evening, he added an offer of lodging for the night. At first they refused—a purely formal refusal demanded by eastern convention. Lot persisted in his offer: they yielded to his importunity; he brought them to his house and “made them a feast . . .” (19, 3).

Segor

The angels told Lot of the impending catastrophe, and bade him warn his friends to make good their escape promptly from that city. Lot advised the two men who were to marry his daughters of what he had heard, but they refused to give him credence. In the morning, the angels urged him to take his wife and two daughters with him and depart at once. He was loath to go, and they literally dragged him and the three women away. When they were outside the fugitives were commanded not to look back, and not to stay in the neighborhood, but to flee to the mountains—and this under pain of death. Terrified of not being able to reach the mountains Lot asked that the smallest city of the Pentapolis, Bala, be spared so that he might take refuge there, pleading that it was a little city. His request was granted, and the city was known ever after as Segor (Se’or—little’) from this circumstance.

Destruction of the Four Cities

“And the Lord rained upon Sodom and Gomorrha brimstone (i.e., ‘sulphur’) and fire from heaven. And he destroyed these cities and all the country round about, all the inhabitants of the cities, and all things that spring from the earth.” (19, 24-25). Such is the biblical description of the demolition of the Pentapolis. Only Sodom and Gomorrha are named, but this because they were the most important. It is implied here and expressly stated in Deuteronomy 29, 22 that Adama and Seboim shared the same fate: Another detail is added later when we are told that Abraham, viewing the scene from a distance, “saw the ashes rise up from the earth as the smoke of a furnace.” (19, 28).

Small wonder that this astounding event, so graphically described here, so frequently referred to in later books of the Bible, and so vividly commemorated in the desolate environs of the Dead Sea should have stirred curiosity and raised speculation in every age. In recent times, science has been able to guide our speculation, at least to some extent. First of all, history closely searched has revealed that there were two different traditions as to the site of the Pentapolis—one (the more ancient) locating it at the northern end of the Dead Sea and the other (the more popular in modern times) placing it at the southern end. Recently, attention has been called to the ‘northern’ tradition by Rev. Edmund Power, S.J. He makes a strong case for it, arguing from archaeology, sacred and profane history, and tradition. The biblical arguments are of greatest interest

to us here. He supports his thesis a) from the route taken by Chedorlahomor and his allies (14, 5-8), they went east, south, and west of the Dead Sea before attacking Pentapolis and b) from the fact that Abraham, looking from Hebron was able to see the signs of the cataclysm in the distance (19, 28). This is possible, he argues, only on the supposition of the northern tradition.

As to the manner in which the ruin of the cities was brought about—geology has definitely ruled out the theory that the Dead Sea was caused by the miracle which destroyed the cities of the Plain. The Dead Sea owes its existence to tectonic movements on a large scale which formed its bed and blocked its natural outlet towards the south through Wadi el Arabah on to the Gulf of Akabah. However, these movements had place long before the time of Abraham, and as early as the miocene epoch according to some. After this we have only the slender account quoted above from Genesis and the speculation of commentators. Philo, the Alexandrian Jew, speaks of “a rain of fire” (De Abramo, 28). This clearly is a literal, indeed a wooden, acceptation of the biblical text, and it finds little favor from modern scholars. One explanation is that an earthquake released the gases, which that bituminous region would naturally hold; and these gases, ignited by “fire from heaven,” i.e., by lightning, caused a conflagration that totally deleted the cities.

“Remember Lot’s Wife”

When leaving the scene of the catastrophe, Lot’s wife was so possessed by curiosity that she neglected the injunction of the angels and paused in her flight to look back. This proved her undoing. Before she realized her danger the sulphurous fumes had blinded and prostrated her. In a short time the salt that abounds in the neighborhood of the Dead Sea had completely covered her corpse: “And his (Lot’s) wife looking behind her was turned into a statue of salt.” (19, 26); the Hebrew reads “was a pillar of salt.”

Lot was afraid to remain in Segor, and after a short time he betook himself to the mountainous region of Moab, where with his two daughters he found shelter in a cave.

Isaac, the Child of Joy

The questions bearing on the cities of the Plain disposed of, we have surmounted the last difficulty of this kind, and for the remainder the story of Abraham runs a smooth course through truly idyllic scenery. He left Hebron and the Hittites for a time, and went to Gerara. He maintained excellent relations with the inhabitants, with whom he entered into

a formal alliance at Bersabee, whence the name —'the well of oath.' Here too Isaac was born, to the great joy of his parents who had so long awaited the fruition of the divine promise.

Abraham, following eastern custom again, "made a great feast on the day of his (Isaac's) weaning" (21, 28); but the joy occasioned by this event soon gave way to sorrow. Ismael was now about sixteen years old, and trouble began again on his account "When Sara had seen the son of Agar the Egyptian playing with her son, she said to Abraham: Cast out this bond-woman. and her son . . ." (21, 9-10). This becomes more intelligible from Galatians 4, 29, where we read that Ismael persecuted Isaac, and the word that is translated 'playing with' in our version of Genesis can have this meaning. At first the patriarch was unwilling to send away Agar and Ismael, but God commanded him to do as Sara had said; and so he gave bread and water to Agar for a journey and dismissed her and her son. They went southward and lived in the desert of Pharan; and in due time Agar chose a wife from her own (Egyptian) nation for Ismael.

The Sacrifice of Isaac

When Isaac was now a grown boy God put Abraham to a tremendous test; and in the issue of this test especially Abraham is shown to be truly 'the man of unwavering faith.' God ordered him to take his beloved Isaac with him "into the land of vision" (i.e., 'the land of Moriah') and there to offer him in sacrifice as a holocaust or whole-burnt victim. Rightly to understand this command it must be remembered that human sacrifice was a stark reality and of frequent occurrence among the heathen nations of this very period. Unmistakable evidences of it have been found in the excavations conducted at Gezer, in the very country where Abraham lived. This fact made the command less astounding for Abraham; but all the more poignant must have been the trial since, while he knew the meaning of it, he did not know the melodramatic ending as we do. It was truly a great act of virtue for him that he set about obeying the command at once. He had the wood for the sacrificial fire procured and loaded on a donkey; and with two attendant servants and the boy Isaac, he set out for the appointed place—a journey of three days. Leaving the slaves and the ass at a distance from the mountain he took the wood and placed it on the shoulders of Isaac; and together they ascended the hill. There he built an altar, "laid the wood' in order, upon it" (22. 9), bound Isaac hand and foot, and was just about to strike the blow when an angel stayed his hand. God did not require the act but the readiness on the part of Abraham to acknowledge Him as supreme Lord and Arbiter of life, and to prefer the divine Will to any human sentiment of interest. Moreover, this event was a dramatic foreshadowing of that other when the Son of God would ascend another hill near Moriah, viz., the hill of Calvary, bearing on His own shoulders the instrument of crucifixion, and this time in effect would offer His life for the Redemption of the world.

Abraham saw a ram caught by its horns in the brambles near him and this he offered in sacrifice on the altar he had prepared. Then he returned home with Isaac.

The Death of Sara

At the age of a hundred and twenty-seven years Sara, the wife of Abraham, died in Cariatharbe (an old name for. Hebron). Abraham mourned her death after the oriental fashion; then having paid his tribute of sorrow he set about procuring a burial place for her remains. The Hebrews were always particular about their graves, and consistently abhorred cremation of the dead. He was only a nomad in the country and owned no land, so he went to “the children of” Heth,” i.e., the Hittites, who were his neighbors to obtain their influence with one Ephron, son of Seor, who had a field with a cave in it, which latter would suit for a tomb. Armed with this introduction from Ephron’s fellow tribesmen Abraham went to the owner of this cave of Machpelah, and began to bargain for its purchase. The whole transaction is described at some length, and it follows the lines to be expected. When negotiations have been opened by intermediaries known to both parties in the projected contract the owner comes forward with numerous courtesies and protestations of good will; he will give the cave willingly, by all means let Abraham bury his dead in that cave; there is no question of payment, forsooth. After protracted speeches in this strain Abraham, who knows these methods well, finally succeeds in bringing Ephron to name his price—four hundred silver shekels—an utterly exorbitant sum. Again the seller pretends to scorn the question of “filthy lucre” in the circumstances “but what is this? Bury thy dead.” (23, 15). Then Abraham weighs out the price and the contract is concluded with all the necessary legal formalities with everything being duly accounted for in the deed and the whole agreement ratified by the presence of witnesses.

Here then, Sara was buried in the cave of Machpelah. This cave was later to receive the remains of the great patriarch himself, his son Isaac, Rebecca (wife of Isaac), and Jacob (son of Isaac), who was brought back from Egypt to be buried with his ancestors in the city of Hebron. (49, 29-31).

Marriage of Isaac

In a lengthy chapter of no ordinary literary interest we are told how a bride was sought and found for Isaac. Pathetically it begins: “Abraham’ was old; and advanced in age.” (24, 1). He wished, therefore, to secure an honorable matrimonial alliance for his loved son and heir before death should claim him. He called to him “the elder servant of his house, and sent him to Mesopotamia to seek there a wife from among his kindred, for Abraham would not have Isaac marry a Chanaanite nor would he allow him to return to Mesopotamia since God had ordered himself to quit his native country finally. The

servant set out at the head of a retinue, bringing ten camels laden with his master's goods to impress those concerned, and assured by Abraham of divine guidance. The servant was worthy of his master; he carried through his mission promptly and prudently. He went direct, (probably via Damascus) to Baran where lived Naxlier, Abraham's brother. Arriving in the afternoon he halted outside the town at the well whither he knew the women, old and young, would come to fetch water at that hour. Commending his enterprise to God he prayed that the maiden who would allow him to drink from her pitcher, and then offer to draw water for his camels might be the wife designed by God for his master's son.

His prayer was scarcely ended when Rebecca, daughter of Bathuel and granddaughter of Nachor, came to the well. He asked her for a drink, and she gave it to him at once and offered to fill the trough for his camels. He then gave her presents of gold ornaments; and when he enquired where he could lodge for the night she went forward to find place for him in her father's house. Laban, Rebecca's brother, now came on 'the scene, and Abraham's ambassador was received to hospitality. The latter, however, refused to touch food until he had first concluded his business... The marriage was arranged forthwith; and a banquet was held to honor the event.

Next morning. Abraham's servant was astir betimes, and he proposed to return at once. The relatives of Rebecca demurred and requested a delay of at least ten days. The matter was referred for decision to Rebecca; and with that strength of mind that was to display itself again later she decided to set out at once, and her decision determined the question for all. She left her home to go to Hebron bringing the good wishes of her family and accompanied by a number of her own personal servants. Special mention is made of the fact that her nurse (named Debora as we know from 35, 8, where her death is commemorated) accompanied Rebecca to her new home, This is one of those homely touches of detail which make the narrative of Genesis so very colorful and realistic.

Isaac married Rebecca with the happiest results. "And he loved her so much, that it moderated the sorrow caused by his mother's death." (24, 67). That last sentence with its simple expression of a beautiful idea is one of the jewels of all literature.

Abraham Dies

After Sara's death Abraham married another wife, Cetura, by whom he had six sons. However, Isaac, "the child of promise," was the heir. Before his death Abraham gave gifts to those other morganatic children and sent them away eastward. The description of the great patriarch's death had better be read from Genesis; "And the days of Abraham's

life were a hundred and seventy-five years. And decaying he died in a good old age, and having lived a long time, and being full of days; and was gathered to his people." (25, 7-8). A simple but eloquent description, which commentary would only spoil.

It is of interest to read that Ismael, the child of the bondwoman Agar, came from the desert to be present at the obsequies of his father, to join in the mourning for him, and to assist the more favored Isaac in laying the remains of "the father of all them that believe" (Romans 4, 11) in their resting place in the cave of Machpelah which he himself had purchased from the Hittite for a tomb for Sara.

Jewish theology spoke of the departed souls of the just as being "in the bosom of Abraham," i.e., 'in the company of Abraham' and the expression has the sanction of Our Divine Lord Himself. (St. Luke 16, 23). The city of Hebron is known in the East generally as EL KHALIL ('The Friend' in Arabic), because of its intimate connection with Abraham whom the asians call EL KHALIL because he is so often styled in Holy Scripture "the friend of God."

CONCLUSION

The history of Abraham abounds in miraculous events. It was fashionable at one time for unbelievers to deny the veracity of this narrative; the tendency in our day is rather to disregard these events and the narrative of them, to act as if God had never spoken and revealed His will to mankind. However, this narrative is an historical document; no amount of criticism could brush it aside; and the attempt was a failure. It is still less becoming for intelligent beings to assume an attitude of indifference towards it. Side by side with the extraordinary events narrated in these chapters we have that astounding fact of history—the religion of Israel. An insignificant nation with no material culture, always menaced by powerful neighboring empires, the Hebrews yet managed to reach a pure religion, belief in One God only, and to give the world religious ideas and aspirations that will endure forever. The only literature they produced was their religious literature and it is unique. "It is one of the standing mysteries of human history."

This fact demands explanation, and the only adequate explanation is that given in Genesis, viz., that God chose this people and favored them with His revealed truth. This revelation has a claim on the attention of every intelligent human being.

"Abraham believed God, and it was reputed to him unto justice." (Romans 4, 3). Saint Paul here quotes from Genesis 15, 6. In this and in several other scriptural passages Abraham is praised for his faith. This text St. Paul proceeds to explain in Romans 4, 3-25. It is an important text because it has the first reference in the Bible to the virtue of faith. The Apostle's explanation is equally important because it is inspired and therefore

authentic. Faith is a necessary condition for salvation. True supernatural holiness begins from the acknowledgment by the individual of the absolute dominion, power, goodness, and veracity of God. Abraham accepted God's word because of the authority of God who spoke it. Again, this faith of Abraham included hope and charity, and in charity is included obedience to God's law and resignation to God's will. Finally, Abraham "against hope believed in hope"; that he might be made the father of many nations, according to that which was said to him: So shall thy seed be." (Romans 4, 18). The object of Abraham's hope was the posterity that God promised him, posterity both carnal and spiritual. Thus, his faith included, at least implicitly, the hope of the Redeemer to come and the entire divine plan of Redemption through Christ.

Abraham's faith "was reputed to him unto justice,"— in the Hebrew 'He (God) accounted his faith to him for justice.' It was supernatural faith, therefore. He was justified by grace and gratis. "God looked so graciously on the faith of Abraham, and accepted it so benevolently, and estimated it so highly, that, out of pure graciousness and favor He reckoned it to Abraham as true justice and holiness." Justification, Saint Paul explains, is not given as a wage or an equivalent—it is a free gift of God. Hence, the word grace is connected with gratis.

Finally, Saint Paul states that Abraham was justified by faith and not by works. (Romans 4, 2-4); Saint James asserts that Abraham was justified by works. (Epistle of St. James 2, 24). There is no contradiction here. The difference of statement is explained by the different context in each Epistle. Saint Paul is arguing against the Judaising heretics who wished to impose on Christians the works of the Old Law such as circumcision; the Old Law is abrogated and replaced by the Gospel. St. James is inveighing against the lack of good works among Christians who profess the Gospel but will not observe its precepts; their faith is dead and inert. For Saint Paul, as for Saint James, faith is of no avail without charity. Charity means love of God and love of our neighbor and this love must find an outlet in those good works that are commanded by the law of Christianity.

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